TACKLING MARINE PLASTIC POLLUTION AND PROTECTING OUR OCEANS

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In 2020, the world's attention turned to the COVID-19 pandemic. But even as we poured all of energy and resources into tackling it, many pointed to wider issues as contributing factors. Nature and biodiversity loss. Climate change. Pollution and waste. The three planetary crises. All of which are destroying the natural world and threatening our future.

Throughout all of this upheaval and debate, we stayed largely focused on the land. This was understandable, as in all likelihood it was the erosion of wild spaces that helped to create COVID-19. But we must not forget the vast blue world of the ocean one of the last remaining wildernesses on the planet that is such a huge asset in maintaining human and planetary health.

Marine ecosystem services make up over 60 per cent of the economic value of all life on earth. They support the livelihoods of over three billion people. They are an essential ally in the fight against climate change.

But the oceans are under attack from the same patterns of unsustainable consumption and production patterns that are causing such problems on land. They have become a dumping ground for all matter of pollution, from plastics to toxic chemicals.

Plastics represent the largest, most harmful and most persistent proportion of marine litter. The cumulative hazards and direct impacts of marine plastics already contribute to an estimated loss of USD 500 to USD 2,500 billion in marine ecosystem services per year.

The Arctic's relative remoteness is no protection from plastic dumped elsewhere.

Carried by currents, waves and wind, plastic pollution is found on Arctic beaches, in the water column, in sea ice, sediments and in Arctic birds and mammals and science has revealed that nano plastics largely from washing of synthetic fibres, primarily in Europe and North America is now linked to the prevalence of microplastics found in 96 of 97 sea water samples across the Arctic, with acrylics, polyester and blended textiles releasing hundreds of thousands of nano fibres per wash. Chemicals like UV 328, which makes plastics more resistant to UV rays, have long-term and persistent toxic impacts, accumulating in organisms, and travelling long distances by air or water. It is now found in wildlife in the Arctic and the Pacific Ocean.

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If we are to make peace with nature, we must transform our relationship with oceans and waters. And we cannot do this without tackling global marine litter and plastic pollution. Today, I would like to talk about five actions we can take to start making our oceans plastic-free.

First, we need to deal with COVID-19-related waste.

Masks, PPE, gloves and other disposal items are an essential part of the COVID-19 response. But this plastic waste threatens to negate strides made in the fight against disposable plastics, marine litter and microplastics especially in countries with weak waste management infrastructure.

The numbers are unprecedented. Single-use face mask production in China soared to 116 million per day in February 2020, about 12 times the usual quantity. Most of these masks go straight to landfill. Disposable masks are now washing up on shores from California to Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, increased take-away services and grocery deliveries during lockdowns also upped the levels of plastic use. The global plastic packaging market size is projected to grow from USD 909.2 billion in 2019 to 1,012.6 billion by 2021.

In addition, miscommunication on the safety of plastics in the context of the health crisis has rolled back progress in promoting policies and practices aimed at reducing plastic pollution. Governments should not weaken their laws on single-use plastic products, as we have seen in some places. It is not the material of the products that make them safer in the pandemic, but the use we make of them. Reusable products may be as safe as single-use ones.

Now that we are beginning to see how we might get on top of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to also start thinking about how to avoid the single-use pandemic.

Second, we are seeing ambition and commitment on plastics. But we need to join up these efforts and fund them.

Regulation is one key tool that government can and must employ. In Africa, 34 of 54 nations have instituted bans of some kind on single-use plastic. As of January 1, amendments to the Basel Convention mean that international shipments of most plastic waste face new controls. Countries facing limitations in exporting plastic waste will have to innovate. Importing countries will now be able to accept only plastic waste that is easy to recycle. Further, under the Stockholm Convention, a series of actions has been set in motion that will see UV 328, a PoP chemical, eliminated or reduced.

In the wake of the United Nations Environment Assembly last week, the international community is looking to build on the work of the Ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics. Let me here acknowledge the leadership by the Nordic Council of Ministers on their report, which outlines what a global agreement to tackle marine litter and plastic pollution might look like. UNEP also applauds the Regional Action Plan (RAP) on marine litter in the Arctic, which will be a valuable tool.

These efforts, and others like them, are great. But to turn the tide, national and regional efforts must be supported by global collaboration across public and private partnerships. Collaborations that can drive ambition, galvanize political will and, critically, unlock large-scale finance.

Third, plans must be based on science and circularity, and appropriate to local conditions.

There is a fundamental need to move to circularity and resource efficiency. We have the science and technology to prioritize and fast track innovative upstream and downstream interventions, in this regard. We should use it.

But we must be aware that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Different geographies and different plastic categories require different solutions.

High-income countries should prioritize decreasing overall plastic consumption, eliminating microplastic leakage, improving product design, and increasing recycling rates.

Middle/low-income countries should prioritize expanding formal collection, maximizing reduction and substitution, investing in sorting and recycling infrastructure, and cutting post-collection leakage.

Fourth, market conditions must immediately shift to change the game.

As with every environmental challenge, the private sector can drive change. We need innovation, cooperation and financing. Innovative models, however, require changes in market conditions that remove hurdles and provide the right economic incentives, coupled with regulatory approaches, to the most sustainable solutions. For instance, reusable packaging should not be considered a waste product to facilitate reverse logistics. The washing machine industry and the textile industry must innovate. Consumers must be engaged so they can make informed choices.

New plastic is not the answer. The value of recycled plastic is undercut by virgin plastic, which is cheap both because of the low cost of the subsidized fossil fuels used to make it and because its pricing doesn't reflect the cost of cleaning it up. The imbalance of investment between production of new plastic production facilities and dealing with waste generation must be addressed. Reuters reports that investment over five years is USD 400 billion versus USD 1.5 billion respectively.

Transparent reporting and accountability must also be at the forefront of urgent interventions to reduce our reliance on virgin plastic polymers, promote recycled plastic and create reuse models that keep resources in our economies at a higher value for longer.

Fifth, we must take the chance we now have to protect our oceans.

The COVID-19 response has shown that society can mobilize to find science-based solutions and resources to meet seemingly insurmountable challenges. We must apply the same steely determination to tackling plastics and take advantage of the opportunities this decade affords.

Countries are working on recovery and stimulus packages that can drive a green transition by ending rewarding nature-positive innovation and sustainable consumption and production solutions. We have two UN Decades kicking off the Decade on Ocean Science for Sustainable Development and UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, both with huge relevance to the issue of marine litter and plastic pollution.

UNEP looks forward to building synergies and close links to the decades, and with member states and partners. By working through the Ocean Decade Alliance: to align research, solutions, investments, and build ocean literacy. By advancing the science-policy interface and digital transformation. By providing technical support for national and regional action plans on marine litter. By building membership of the Global Partnership on Marine Litter and its open-source digital platform. By building awareness and mobilizing action through the Clean Seas campaign and building beyond its current 62 signatory countries.

Ministers, Colleagues, Friends

Ultimately, we will pay the price for our throw-away plastics habit. So we must band together across government, private sector, civil society and citizenry to move away from unsustainable production and consumption patterns for people and planet.

2021 can be the year that we put the world on the path to achieving the SDGs, underpinned by a sustainable blue economy.

We can create a clean ocean where sources of pollution are identified and reduced or removed. A healthy and resilient ocean, where marine ecosystems are understood, protected, restored and managed. A productive ocean, supporting sustainable food supply and a sustainable ocean economy. An ocean that we treat with the respect it deserves.

Thank you.

Inger Andersen

Executive Director

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